

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, August 1878, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. Shelburne Hotel, Dublin, Saturday, August something, 1878. My dear May:

The trousers are a success! The “average man” of my girth is not so badly shaped after all. It is true that his lower extremities (!) are fully six inches longer than mine. What of that? The circumference is the same, and a pair of scissors, and a needle and thread make his trousers fit me to a T. I glance with satisfaction at my reflection in the glass and can scarcely believe that the garments were not made specially to fit my limbs! I am sorry that I have not left the unmentionables unmentioned — but you are my wife — and in your nice letter just received you demand an account of all I do — hear — think — or see — so you must take the consequences. Let me see — I left you at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool or rather my last letter left me there. No that's not right yet! Well then — it was I who left the Adelphi Hotel when my last letter to you was posted.

I caught up my valise and hat-box and with my unmentionables under my arm — sallied forth into the night in search of a hansom.

Alas! for the fallibility of human conclusions! The builders of the Dublin Steam-packet had either failed to consult the Liverpool Tailors upon the subject of the dimensions of the “average man” or had based their calculations upon different data; for I found upon entering my berth for the night that this obnoxious individual was several inches shorter on board the Packet than he was upon shore! However by dint of an expedient first taught me by you in the little village of Cove-sea in the north of Scotland I managed to make myself pretty comfortable until I was awakened by a most offensive sound proceeding from a man

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in the 2 opposite berth who was objecting in the most unmistakeable manner to the violent pitching and rolling of the vessel.

It was blowing what the steward called “a cap-ful of wind” but the motion of the vessel was not disagreeable to me as the air of the cabin and the presence of my distressed companion — so I rose and went upon deck. The hot oily smell from the engine and the excessive motion of the vessel however soon caused me to change my mind and I retreated to my berth with a sick giddy feeling that proved the premonitory symptoms of a bad headache. In spite of my headache I enjoyed the sail into Dublin Harbour and wonder at the never-ending docks with their hundreds and thousands of vessels gathered together from every quarter of the globe. Liverpool and Dublin have emphasized in my mind the remarks of Herbert Spencer in his study of Sociology concerning the wide-spread sources of our food supplies and everything I see seems to impress more vividly upon my memory his chapter upon the Walter Printing Press as a proof of the greatness of our present civilization.

In Liverpool I saw sugar and molasses from Jamaica by the houseful — mountains of wheat and grain from Russia — coal by the acre — wood enough to cremate the whole population of London and vast accumulations of produce of every kind brought from all parts of the world. And then the ships and the people! Miles of vessels loading and unloading and armies of men of every race and colour and policemen in petticoats here and there superintending affairs! The sail into Dublin Harbour leads me to believe that the commerce of Dublin is by no means inferior to that of Liverpool. The harbour is so crowded with ships of all kinds that only a narrow water-way is left for the passage of vessels.

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I admired exceedingly the dexterity with which our steamer was got into position alongside the quay. There was a gap in the ranks just large enough for one vessel and it seemed to me that a collision of some sort was inevitable. But the men knew what they were about

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and we glided into position as easily and gracefully as possible — without even touching any of the vessels on either side.

We were boarded at once and in a moment half a dozen rough looking men were struggling for possession of my bag, hat-box and case of telephones. I speedily selected one and he carried my things to a cab in waiting and I drove off to the Shelbourne Hotel.

Sunday, August 18th.

My candle caused my letter last night to come to an untimely end. I had just written as far as the above when it flared up and before I could take off my things for bed it gave a last dying flicker and left me in the dark. Just fancy — after all I have come here on a wild-goose chase. Prof. Helmholtz has never been near Dublin! On consulting the Times once more I find that it merely stated that Helmholtz had been elected a “c orresponding member” of the Association! No mention was made of his bodily presence and he is neither here nor likely to be nearer than a thousand miles!! Immediately on reaching the hotel I donned my new garments — made myself respectable with my new hat and pair of gloves and sallied forth in search of Trinity College. Upon arriving at the center of affairs I found that the Association had gone off on an excursion to County Wisklow — President — Secretaries and all — and were not expected back till just in time for the Lord Mayor's Banquet in the evening. The first person I recognized on entering the reception room 4 at Trinity College was Mr. Hyde Clarke but for reasons that I will now tell you I took no notice of him until he came up himself to shake hands and so assured me of his identity. While at dinner in the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool I recognized three persons with whom I was acquainted. Miss Carlotta Le Clerc or Le Clarcque (the actress) and a gentleman who accompanied her and Mr. Hyde Clarke.

The room was quite full when Mr. Clarke came in and he wandered disconsolately about the room in search of a table. I accordingly rose and addressed him by name inviting him to a seat at my table. To my surprise he looked me full in the face and denied his own

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name! He said I had mistaken him for some one else! I took a good parting look at him and could have sworn to his identity. His beard had been slightly trimmed since I saw him last but otherwise he was Mr. Hyde Clarke and no one else under the sun. I was afraid to speak to Miss Le Clerc for fear of a similar rebuff — and she did not recognize me. I found out afterwards by the Theatre Placards that she was in town so I presume I was right in her case.

You will therefore understand why it was that when I again encountered Mr. Hyde Clarke at the Association — I left him to recognize me before I ventured to address him myself. I told him of my Liverpool rencontre and he laughed. He said he knew he had a double wandering about the world somewhere, and many of his friends had been taken in in the same way.

Finding nothing was to be done at the Association I left a note for Mr. Spottiswood — obtained a printed list of members and their addresses and went forth in search of friends.

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Dr. Brady was out. Prof. James Thomson and family were in Wicklow with the Association. Sir William and Lady Thomson were storm-bound on some rock-stre<sup>n</sup> coast and had not arrived. The Bottomleys were in Kingstown. The Spottiswoods absent. Professors Adams, Barrett, Huxley, Ingram, Stokes, Williamson, Sir John Lubbock, Lord Rayleigh, Dr. Gladstone, Dr. Allen Thomson, Dr. Lawson Tait, Mr. Preece, Mr. Romanes, Captain Douglas Galton -- all — all -- were out. Not one to be found — and I had to entertain myself alone as best I could. “J. K. McClure, Esq., F.R.G.S. (The Telephone Company Limited)” I did not care to visit — but I presume that he also was absent on the excursion.

I jumped upon an Irish Jaunting Car and told the man to drive me where he chose — anywhere anywhere out of the town. My head ached so much that I was rather glad than otherwise to be left alone — and was satisfied with having left my cards upon my friends. It is so many years since I last saw Ireland that Dublin comes upon me quite like

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a new city. The first thing that strikes me is the absence of four-wheeled vehicles — I have seen nothing as yet upon four wheels excepting cabs, horse-cars and an occasional open carriage. All vans and carts however large and bulky are upon two wheels. No hansoms are to be seen — but instead the far-famed “Jaunting Cars.” They are really very comfortable things in fine weather especially when you have something to hold on to. They remind me of open portmanteaus on wheels. One portmanteau over each wheel. You sit on one side and the driver balances you on the other. I am no draughtsman as you know but the following may give you some idea of the conveyance.

The man took me right out into the country — along roads edged by walls of mud and past houses or shanties of mud without any chimnies until in the distance I saw a noble pile of buildings looking like some hospital or Religious house. “What building is that?” I asked the man. “Arrah, Sir. That's the Deaf and Dumb Asylum”!! “The very thing” — I said — “drive me there” — and that is how I came to spend the afternoon at the “St. Joseph's — Cabra-Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

This Institution is the finest I have seen on this side of the Atlantic. It has been established and supported entirely by voluntary subscriptions, but far from conveying the idea of poverty and neglect so strikingly suggested by the English schools — there is an air of comfort and attention to the wants of the pupils — that argues a conscientious discharge of the duties of instruction. I was very sorry that the Principal was absent and that the boys were at home for there is evidently much to interest me here. And I have resolved to pay the institution a special visit of inspection before returning to America. The building I saw in devoted entirely to boys — and there is another institution about a mile distant for girls.

The one Institution is managed by “The Christian Brothers” — and the other by a society of nuns. These I understand are the only Catholic Institutions in Ireland — which will account for their size and 7 evident importance. About 240 boys are accommodated in the one Institution and over 200 girls in the other.

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“Brother Ryan” — who showed me over the place evidently knew very little about it — and was even unable to communicate with one or two of the pupils who were still in the Institution — and had no homes to go to.

They are taught by the Sign-Language and one-handed alphabet and (according to Brother Ryan) articulation is a thing unknown in the school.

I shall pay a visit to the Principal before leaving and hope to gain more trustworthy information.

Trade-Schools are established in connection with the school. Carpentry, Baking, Tailoring, Shoemaking, Saddlery and Brushmaking are taught to the pupils and the Christian Brothers keep an eye upon the boys after they leave school and obtain situations for them where they can obtain a livelihood. I fear that the pupils while doubtless obtaining plenty of ideas through the medium of the language of signs imbibe “a plentiful lack” of language.

I saw a young man in one of the shops who was said to be an ex-pupil of the Institution. I entered into conversation with him and asked him what his business was and how he got on with his employers, etc. He seemed however to be unable to spell out his thoughts upon his fingers without a plentiful intermixture of unintelligible signs. Neither Brother Ryan nor I nor the master of the shop were able to understand his replies. And yet he was evidently a bright intelligent young man — and had passed through the whole curriculum of the school. I handed him a pencil and some paper and asked him what his wages were. He wrote 8 “I earns 11 shillings at home a week.” I asked him whether that included his board but could not make him understand what I meant. I then asked whether he lived at home and whether he took his food at home. He replied “I has rich at home”! And this was all I could get out of him. If he is a fair example of the “average man” turned out by the Christian Brothers I must take back my eulogiums upon the school.

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The specimens of work done by the boys would have done credit to any shop in the Kingdom. The Chapel is a magnificent hall with altar crucifix etc., that would have adorned a Cathedral. The altar etc., was railed in and curtained from sight on ordinary days — reminding me of the sacred place of the Jewish Temple. Brother Ryan drew aside the curtain for my benefit and bowed reverently before the altar. In the Chapel were two pulpits for boys — with metal clips in front supporting rosaries. Brother Ryan said that two of the boys would go into the pulpits to tell their beads. As it would have been inconvenient for them to have held their rosaries in their hands the metal clips were arranged. When they had told one bead — they placed the rosary upon the metal stand — the clip marking the bead that had been told — and they were then free to use their hands and say the next prayer by signs and the manual alphabet. On the conclusion of this prayer another bead was moved along and they proceeded with the next.

The school-room was a large airy — nice looking room. The walls were covered with pictures and with large slates. As in the English schools all the pupils were in one room. This hall was divided off into spaces for fifteen different classes.

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Seven on each side of the hall and one at the end — somewhat as in the following sketch.

Plan for School-room.

A. Desk for master.

B. Desks for pupils

C. Forms for pupils to sit on.

The school-books were looked up and therefore inaccessible. One book of “Elementary Lessons for the Deaf and Dumb” published by the Institution was presented to me by Brother Ryan.

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I was much struck by one charts upon the wall entitled "Picture-Lessons in Geography" published by Smith & Son, 63 Charing Cross — and shall try to get a set for Miss Fuller's School.

The Dormitories contained only twenty-five beds each — and in each room was a curtained space for one of the "Brothers." Everything looked clean and tidy. Iron bedsteads, horse-hair mattresses and straw pillows. The only thing objectionable to me was the presence of highly realistic religious pictures. Christ prostrate upon the cross whilst a man was busily engaged in driving a nail through one hand. Christ upon the cross — Christ being scourged — everywhere agony — agony — a very undesirable thing it seemed to me for the boys' bedrooms. I did not see one pleasant picture in the dormitories — whereas according to my ideas - 10 the bedrooms should be full of sunshine and bright pictures. I forget where it was I was told of the contrast between the Pagan Temples and the Christian Temples at Rome. Oh! Yes — I remember --- Prof. Monroe. He alluded to the simplicity and beauty of the Heathen temples — whilst the Christian temples were Charnel houses — with their walls decorated with devices made of human skulls and leg-bones and with the dried-up bodies of departed monks seated or standing around, dressed in their every day costume.

Here too — it seemed to me that the horrible predominated over the good and the beautiful.

Surrounded as these children are by realistic pictures and statues I should have grown up to consider God as a devil — delighting in horrible things — and have carried away a lasting impression of the worthlessness of human life — of its sorrows and of its agonies.

I should have looked upon life as not worth living and have been kept straight in my course of action only by a wholesome dread of the terrors of the hereafter.



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I really longed to see some pictures that would give the children an idea of a heavenly father — blessing and loving his children — of Mercy — and the hundred other good points of the Christian's beliefs — but nothing of the kind met my gaze excepting a picture of Christ healing the Deaf and Dumb. I don't profess to be a Christian myself — but I do hope that when our little Elsie comes to imbibe the prejudices and dogmas inherent in our present state of civilization — that you will teach her to look upon God as a God of Love. If she must imbibe the Christian's dogmas as well as the Christian's Principles of Life — let her learn to believe in God as a heavenly father — and in an ever-present helpful Christ. But keep from her as long as possible the horrible and insane ideas of eternal damnation and hell-fire — and the idea of the existence of a devil.

Well now — I think I have written you a long enough letter this time but it is your own fault. You know you wished me to write of everything I had seen or heard and of everything I thought of and you must take the consequences. I returned from the Institution to the Hotel at six o'clock in time for “table d'hôte” but my head ached so badly that I gave up all ideas of dinner and lay down for a nap. About ten o'clock I rose refreshed and had a hearty supper (but no tea) and then wrote my letter to you till my candle went out.

I found a note downstairs from Mr. Spottiswood enclosing your letter which had been opened by mistake — and this morning I received the enclosed invitation from Mr. Spottiswood which I intend accepting. I have devoted this day to my dear little wife and I must now close. I shall merely write a note to Max Muller and then start for Lord Gough's. Mind you write to me and tell me of everything that you do and think of and see — and of what you all do — or my next note shall be as brief as Sir Charles Dilke's letter to me and the postman will come and the postman will go — but no word from Ireland. Don't believe me my dear — you don't suppose that I could help writing to you of everything my sweet darling wife. I am anxious to hear from you again. Love to Grandma, Auntie Gertrude, Auntie Berta and to my dear little Elsie.

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Your own, Alec.